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ABSTRACT

A rural library project of the Intermountain Group, a network of four land-grant universities, eight local communities, and the state libraries in Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Montana, developed a Community Interest Inventory and solicited information on professional information needs from identified community groups who were users or potential users of informational and educational/training services. It was found that 60 percent of the respondents had sought information; over 65 percent were participating in organized educational or training programs; and over 33 percent were forced to go outside their community to get needed information. Based on these results, proposals are made for the development of rural community learning and information centers with links to larger libraries. The commitment of the Intermountain Group to this new concept of library service for rural residents and some projections for the role of such centers in the future are noted. (ESR)

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MORE THAN THE LAYING ON OF HANDS:
NEEDED SERVICES AND PATRON EXPECTATIONS OF
SELECTED RURAL LIBRARIES IN INTERMOUNTAIN COMMUNITIES

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MORE THAN THE 'LAYING ON OF HANDS'

I am sincerely pleased to have been asked by President Stone to participate in the special President's Program of the American Library Association. I am especially pleased about the theme of this session--"Increasing Client Awareness" about library and information services. I hope that I might share with you some information and insights about a rural library project in our Intermountain states which underscore the necessity of improved information service delivery to meet not only the needs of our rural residents but their demands as well.

Having grown up in Mormon Country, I remember a story about J. Golden Kimball, an outspoken and often humorous leader of the Mormon Church, and U.S. Senator Reed Smoot, who was also one of what is called the Twelve Apostles under the President of the Mormon Church. As the story is related, it seems that Senator Smoot's wife had died and the Senator, now in his late sixties, had become lonely and wanted to take his long-time secretary, who was about 25 years younger than the Senator, as his new bride. Knowing his high position in the Mormon Church, Senator Smoot felt that he should ask permission of the Church President and other members of the Church hierarchy before announcing his marriage.

On one of his visits to Salt Lake City, Senator Smoot visited with the church's president and other members of the hierarchy, and all agreed that it was not only desirable for Senator Smoot to marry his secretary, but that the Senator and his wife would be blessed with happiness and marital fulfillment. The Senator was pleased, but as he was leaving the Church Office Buildings, he met Brother J. Golden

Kimball coming up the steps, and he decided that he would share the good news with him and to solicit his opinion.

Senator Smoot greeted Brother Kimball and said, "Brother Kimball, I've got some good news; I have the President's permission to marry my secretary. What do you think about it?"

Kimball, somewhat startled by the Senator's announcement, replied in his high squeaky voice: "Well I don't know about that. Your an old man and she's a young woman, and she's going to want more than the 'laying on of hands'."

I

This Utah anecdote brings me to my first point: that we must become aware of the needs and wants of our clients and must be able to continue to serve those needs to maintain and strengthen our base of support. In our Intermountain States--like much of the rural United States--most of the informational resources are concentrated in the urban centers, especially in college or university communities. Our rural libraries in the Intermountain States, in general, have very limited informational resources, and generally serve the leisure interests of the public--a fine and needed community function. But by serving this narrow segment of the population, even of the smaller rural communities, the rural library is perceived to have a limited role within the community, and does not enjoy the luxury of adequate budget, modern equipment, and in some, even telephones. Though residents have a positive attitude, in general, about the community library, their perception is limited to it as a place for general reading but lacking information specific to individual or community problem-solving.

Consider, for example, the situation of a rural medical doctor or nurse in Meeker, Colorado, a small town of about 2500 residents on the Western slopes of the Rocky Mountains. The doctor is about five-and-a-half hours away from the University of Colorado's medical library in Boulder and nearly six-and-a-half hours from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. Confronted with a patient diagnosis for which the doctor has little background of experience, information is both vital and relevant to improved health care, but the doctor has no means to get relevant and vital information--nor can he identify the particular sources from which the information could be gotten. The medical professional, we've found, is willing to pay for this information if they can get meaningful information delivered to them in a timely and relevant, understandable form. But this is true for other professional and small business groups in these rural communities: the rural school teacher needs information from ERIC for improved classroom use or for graduate study; the rural elected official and community planners need information about land-use planning, about federal and state regulations, and about sewage, water and road systems; even the rural farmer or rancher needs information and training concerning agriculture markets, commodity projections, and management techniques.

Just recently, I talked with a lawyer about what his information needs were. He, fortunately, resides in a community with a good law library, but in attempting to research information in milk production and cattle feed supplements for a case he was trying, he was at a loss: he could not get the relevant information necessary to form valid judgments--at least convincing enough to a jury. Instead of consulting the resources in the public library, the lawyer telephoned a dairy

specialist at the land-grant university, who, in turn, had to search for the information at his library. This was both time-consuming and costly, but it was necessary to adequately represent his client. The lawyer would have been willing to have paid for a search had such services been available and known at the public library.

My point in using these examples, both real and hypothetical, is that professional information needs represent a "target of opportunity" for our libraries to serve, especially in the information-poor rural communities throughout the Intermountain West, and perhaps throughout the United States. Furthermore, by providing relevant and vital informational services to targeted professional groups, I suspect that it could result in increased local support for library information services--at least this is the premise we are following for implementing a rural library project in our Intermountain states.

II

I would like to share with you some of the information our Intermountain group--comprised of four land-grant universities, state libraries, and eight local communities--have gathered over the past two years of community development activity. Our regional group solicited information from identified community groups who were "users" or "potential users" of informational and educational/training services. The communities were selected from four Intermountain states on the basis of four factors: (1) potential or experienced population growth (a factor of need for improved services); (2) an existing community library facility which could become a Learning and Information Center; (3) the willingness of the local community librarian to work with

improved information delivery (and I add, a librarian who was willing to receive additional training in information technologies and was interested in serving a broader cross-section of community clientele); and (4) the support for innovation from the community library board, school districts, and from the county and city government leaders.

We developed, what we call, a "Community Interest Inventory" a non-scientific survey instrument which were given out to user or potential user groups--defined as groups of professionals who might benefit from informational resources if they were available. We sought three forms of information: (1) local attitudes toward informational and educational services, and where local residents got information resources; (2) their assessments of local informational resources available to them; and finally, (3) what their written needs for information or educational/training programs were. In addition, we also obtained vital demographic and statistical information concerning the respondents. Though we did not scientifically select the samples, we compared our sample populations with the demographic information and found significant parallels to the existing community populations--age distributions, income, occupations, among other variables. We also discovered that the rural community in Wyoming has similar needs as does the rural community in Utah, Colorado, and Montana.

Regionwide, nearly 60% of our respondents indicated that they had sought information over the past year. Furthermore, these rural residents sought information from a number of local community sources, including the local library, county Extension offices, among other local information agencies. The local community library--even with its limited resources--is the first source most residents use. But even

more interesting was that 46% of the regional respondents who had sought information had to send out of the community for the information they needed. Even by sending for the information, over half of these rural residents received only "some" information related to their needs. Even more startling was that nearly one third of the respondents left their community to get the information--driving the three or more hours necessary to a library or state agency which possibly had the necessary information.

This also points out other problems for rural and possibly urban information seekers: how do they locate relevant information and how do they gain access to it if it is available?

III

Not only were rural respondents needing additional informational resources, over 65% of them had participated in some organized educational program during the past year. Again, many of the residents had to travel great distances to enroll in many of these programs. From their written responses, our "inventory" has produced a listing of educational subjects and programs which are evidently not being satisfied fully by local educational organizations. Furthermore, these "requests" or desires are found in all eight communities and in each of the four Intermountain states. One of the more "pressing" needs for educational and training programs is in the area of Family and Human Development--especially in communities subject to rapid population growth because of energy resource development. Other areas, however, were also requested by the regional respondents, including needed

programs in adult basic education, recertification programs for school teachers and other community professionals, and practical learning programs in CPR methods, family health and nutrition, or drug abuse control. There are thousands of educationally disenfranchised learners in our rural communities, and the rural public library has an opportunity to serve these learners.

IV

I've talked much about the needs of rural residents, but I've given little attention to what interests the participating universities and state libraries have in our rural community libraries. The vast network of community libraries represent to us a delivery system for the future development of rural American--particularly rural Western America. They are existing, locally-supported institutions which, with local willingness and direction, can become a Rural Community Learning and Information Center to serve both informational needs and learning and training.

The lower-cost computer-assisted information transfer is now a reality: national, regional and state databases are available to transmit to the rural information seeker the relevant and timely information which can address an individual's problems. At present, I think it a mistake to assume that each individual home will be wired with a computer terminal which will provide direct user access to informational databases; like the lawyer seeking agricultural information referred to earlier, most in our society will not have the skills to use all the databases available to us. The librarian, as an information specialist, can possess those particular skills valued by

the professional in the community and can strengthen informational services to that sector. With over 950 publicly accessible databases currently available, the rural information specialist has a prime, active role to play in rural development processes.

As we project the future, a second role the rural library will play is that of an educational resource center. Again, telecommunications--teleconferencing, videotape and videodisc, satellite transmission, and interactive computer-assisted learning programs--will link the metropolitan and university resource centers to the rural community Learning and Information Center. Vacant areas, including basements, will be equipped to carry out formal educational programs, which can link groups of rural learners in various community sites at the same time and can provide relevant training and enrichment programs to rural residents who have limited access to educational programs or post-secondary education.

For the Library as a Community Learning and Information Center to be effective, it must embrace and support the existing informational services and expand on their capabilities. For example, the network of Cooperative Extension agents can be supported by providing referral services to Library patrons on matters of nutrition, agriculture, pesticides, and weed control. At the same time, the County Extension agent becomes aware of the opportunities afforded and can provide, if encouraged by the librarian, new sources of practical, problem-solving information. Other groups, including medical associations, state planners, educators, can also be made aware of the potential of a community shared-use facility.

Our targeted demonstration communities have committed themselves to a new concept of service to rural residents--one which we believe will strengthen not only the role of the rural library as a Learning and Information Center in the Intermountain region but will also strengthen its needed services and build community support for the future. The rural library's future may arise out of a desire to be more effective and to build stronger bases of clientele.

As I read the future, people are going to need and want "more than the laying on of hands," and the library may be the public institution to create and give energy to the future. I thank you for this opportunity to present some views of patron with a positive respect for the public library.